

1975

# Jewish Lightning

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## Recommended Citation

Ganz, Earl. "Jewish Lightning." *The Iowa Review* 6.1 (1975): 17-25. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1785>

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## Jewish Lightning

The priest had brought my overcoat and bookbag, was busying himself, first with hanging the coat in the room's tiny closet, then with opening the bookbag, taking out the books, and laying them in a row on the table that bridged the bed. I remember there was a moment of awkward silence until I realized he wanted me to acknowledge that everything was there. Let's see. There was Newman's *Apologia* of course. And James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. And I think perhaps Darby Nock's book on conversion. It was mid-November and I had just begun my senior seminar paper, the one that eventually grew into my book on religious attitudes in Victorian England. Ah, that was an exciting time, just an inkling that one might be beginning one's life's work. Be that as it may, I never did make the acknowledgment. The late afternoon sun, which all day had been circling the Charles River, decided at that very moment to swoop through a crack in my carelessly pulled curtains and settle like a glowing bird upon the priest's right shoulder.

"What is it?"

"What's the matter?"

"Shall I call the nurse?"

"Are you all right?"

As one might imagine my scorched eyes were terribly sensitive to light and I had to look away to the opposite wall, the dark aisle on that side of the bed. The doctors had warned me that something like this might happen, had explained it as a kind of afterglow effect, a brain lesion which they promised would fade with time. Yet now that I think about it I'm sure they never meant anything as vivid as I was seeing at that moment, the whole wall afire. Have you ever seen something that you knew was not there? And it wasn't until I realized that my stare was upsetting my visitor that I forced myself to turn back to him. Happily he seemed to have guessed the cause, had gone to the window, pulled the curtain and returned to my bedside. My eyes, I explained after taking a moment to regain my composure. And then to change the subject I asked why there had been no mention of the fire in the newspapers? In truth I'd been disappointed at the lack of recognition my bravery had received, had fully expected reporters to have come round, had had the nurse save the *Monitor* and *Globe*. So I complained to him of their callousness. After all, a man had died.

"What!"

"But you're mistaken."

"No one died."

"What made you think someone died?"

A second blow to my senses. After all, I had been burned by the flaring of a bed upon which lay an old man, an explosion of heat so powerful it had lifted me off my feet and into unconsciousness. How could anyone at the center survive? But there wasn't anyone there, the priest answered, and then tried to explain that given the circumstances, the absolute darkness, then the terrific burst of light, my thinking I saw somebody was quite natural. But, he assured me again, there had been nobody. I didn't argue, a few minutes later allowed him to leave thinking I was convinced and comforted. But I wasn't. Have you ever had someone tell you that you had not seen something that you were certain you had seen, that, in fact, at the very moment you were being given reasons why you had not seen it, out of the corner of your eye you were seeing it again, there in your hospital room beside your bed, and feeling it too, the old man's flaming hand reaching out, two fingers of pain above your eyes that, once the priest had gone, drove you to call the nurse and beg for more of the narcotic pills the doctors had lavished upon you?

Even now I can feel them, now as I touch the old scars with my fingertips. Yes, more than two decades later I still bear the marks of that night, two round swirls of lumpy white tissue, each about the size of a quarter, symmetrically placed on either side of my forehead just in front of my temples. They make me look, or so I have been told, like Michelangelo's depiction of the horned Moses. Can you imagine! Moses! Be that as it may, a week later, as soon as I was released, I went to visit the priest. Never mind the name of his church. That good man is still there caring for his parish and I have no wish to embarrass him in his old age. I remember that I had to wait in his study and that I wandered aimlessly about looking at books, touching objects, but all the time aware of the feeling that I was being watched, a feeling that at one point became so intense I wheeled about to catch my imaginary spy in the act. To my dismay, there he was! The burning old man curling his fingers out to me! It was horrible. Yet in another moment I realized it was nothing more than illusion, a kind of double exposure, my own image reflected in the glass panel of a door behind which hung some kind of shiny material.

It was a chasuble, a priest's over-garment worn at high mass, usually a simple thing, a stiff white cape with a golden cross front and back. Well, this one was far from simple and even today I cannot quite place it in time, whether or not it was actually some example of medieval clerical pomp or just a Johnny-come-lately product of the Gothic revival, and I'm sorry to say I never did ask the priest about it. Yet I was fascinated and I remember with what excitement I felt its golden threaded coolness. Who, once he has

worn such a garment, can argue with the bromide that clothes make the man? See the priest in his magnificent robe. See the golden Christ hanging from his spine, the Savior's hands nailed to his scapulae, the silver Marys praying at each buttock, while between his legs, naked and hand in hand, dance Adam and Eve. See the priest raise his arms to invoke the Almighty. Then look again. It isn't the priest at all. Look! It's me!

"I'm sorry."

"A confession."

"Now we can talk."

"What brings you here?"

When he finally came some minutes later all was as it had been, the chasuble back on its hanger in the closet, I wandering about. In answer to his question I expressed my desire to meet the old man who was supposed to have survived. I explained that I wanted to see if he was the same old man I thought I had seen. For I was sure I had an explanation of what had happened that did not exclude my version of things. It was simple. There had been a third party, another old man beside the one who had been rescued, and whose charred remains, for some inexplicable reason, had either not been discovered or not reported. A boarder perhaps or an unwanted relative or even a prowler? I remember that he shrugged and answered rather gravely that I could meet the old man if I wanted, that he knew where they were living now, had gotten the place for them himself. But he wasn't sure it was wise. And then, seeing the puzzled look on my face, he asked me if I did not remember what had happened after my rescue? I shook my head no. But don't you remember the old man's daughter?

"She was desperate."

"She needed her costumes."

"Without them she can't work."

"She's a . . . dancer . . ."

And just as I was about to ask him what on earth he was talking about it all came back, me sitting on the running board of the fire truck, someone holding something over my face. The oxygen mask. And I remembered how the house looked, old brown paint shining like chocolate, smoke a deep battleship grey, flames bright orange, everything brightened and artificial, a combination no doubt of the oxygen and the floodlights the trucks had brought with them. And there she was in front of me, her red and yellow Indian blanket bathrobe brighter than anything. She was reaching out to me, taking something from me, holding it up for all to see. At first I didn't understand. How did she do it? A bright blue satin thing covered with red sequins. What was it? One cup of a brassiere! And I remember I laughed, though my head hurt at the spot from which she had pulled the material. I felt the way a child must feel when the parlor magician pulls an egg from

his ear, had to push the mask away. And who knows? Perhaps it was my laughter that triggered her rage.

"You!"

"You did it!"

"You started it!"

"You Jew bastard!"

It's not altogether implausible to relate the current notion that Jews are partial to fires for profit to their medieval reputation as arsonists. In 1337, in the town of Deggendorf, Bavaria, as a result of a charge of host desecration, the Jewish Quarter was attacked and set on fire. But fire spread rapidly through the tinderbox towns of those days and in no time all Deggendorf was ablaze. Later, when a church was erected to commemorate the event and a suitable inscription was placed at its entrance, it read: "Anno 1337, the day following Michaelmas Day, here were the Jews slain. They had set the city on fire." Perhaps this inscription best explains my own fate for, as the priest related woefully to me, her accusation was believed on the spot; a crowd of her angry neighbors was already forming. Can you imagine! She had sent me in, not for her father but her costumes. I had risked my life for costumes! And when I failed she was willing to blame the whole thing on me, perhaps even had planned it that way. And they were ready to believe her! The ovens of Auschwitz still warm, the horrible newsreels still being shown at their neighborhood theaters, and there they were, these Irish peasants, ready to tear me limb from limb. What was I doing in the house? What was I doing in their neighborhood? Did I work for the Jew landlord?

Be that as it may, when I left the priest that night I was in many ways relieved. For one thing, my questions had been answered and in such a surprising manner that I had not yet had time to formulate others. For another, the priest himself had made an impression on me. Oh I know. There are those who will say he took advantage of me, of my youth, my injury, my fear. Such were the later comments of my family and friends. To these and like doubts I can only say that I believe he acted out of genuine concern. After all, what did we end up talking about but my paper, about John Henry Newman in particular? For it turned out that like Newman the priest too was a convert and that Newman's *Apologia* had had a great effect on his decision. It was an interesting discussion. The *Apologia* had been written as a defense against Charles Kingsley, one of those Victorian types described as a "muscular Christian," against Kingsley's charge that Newman had advocated dishonesty in dealing with attacks on the Church. Like most followers of the argument the priest and I both believed Newman had thoroughly squashed Kingsley with his great spiritual document, that, in fact, the great drama of the autobiography was not in the argument at all but in

the movement of Newman's mind toward Catholicism.

Now, years later, I've come to think the opposite. For the *Apologia* more than substantiates Kingsley's charge of dishonesty; Newman's book is nothing more than an interesting argumentum ad misericordium in which the accused, instead of marshalling his whole family before the court of public opinion, simply presents himself at various stages of his own development. He does the very thing Kingsley has accused him of doing, begs the question, but does it so beautifully that ethical truth is replaced by aesthetic truth. Anyway, it was these and like thoughts that put me to sleep that night, casuistic thoughts, yet comforting in the easy exercise of my mind. So that when I began to dream that I was back in that black smoky house I was not alarmed. For the dream had that same feeling about it as the argument, a feeling that assured me I would know the right moment to wake myself, assured me that I knew I was dreaming. No, I was not afraid when I heard the tinkling of glass, felt the rush of wind on my face, saw the old man's bed burst into flame, his body curl in the heat, his hand reach out to me. And I opened my eyes. But to my amazement, instead of the cool waking blackness of my room, there was an even more blinding light and searing heat. Now I realize that I was still asleep, though at that moment in my dream I was certain I was awake, lying in my own bed, the old man in a robe of some kind in the doorway, burning there. It was too much and I closed my eyes, screamed. But all this did was put me back in my first dream, I standing in the doorway once more, he burning in the bed, covered with the garment of fire, reaching out, fingers burning. I screamed and screamed until my suite-mates came and pulled me out.

"But I saw him!"

"He was in my room!"

"He was reaching out for me!"

"Burning me."

Of course I should have kept the psychiatric appointment those two good fellows made for me that morning. But the failure of one's mind to work properly, or at least in its usual way, leads to a failure of confidence in the mind's usual supports. Like most Harvard undergraduates of that day, I believed, almost to the point of dogma, in the efficacy of psychiatry and the Freudian view of the world, a view based on the assumption that all that is needed to right a psychological wrong is the discovery of the cause of that wrong; that is a view based on a certain kind of sanity, on an assumption that one knows what is happening. But I had seen things that were not there and dreamed dreams that were. And what about the appearance of the chasuble in my dream? Was this garment a snare placed in my mind by the Church? But then who was snaring whom? For the priest kept trying to talk me out of it, kept explaining over and over that nobody had

been there, that what I had seen was nothing more than a pile of costumes, the flaming hand only burning clothing flying from the bed. And he kept talking about my injury, my pain, the flashes occurring inside my head, the drugs I was taking. At first I was astounded, then angry; I had expected much more from him. Yet when I looked into his face, saw the concern there, I knew better, knew I was being tested, that he was in some way guarding something I wanted though I could not say what it was. And nervously I paced about his study, touching objects, picking up religious artifacts, until I came upon the glass door. I remember I gasped, then stumbled backwards into a chair.

"It's just a chasuble!"

"Here!"

"A ceremonial garment!"

"Look!"

"Just a piece of cloth!"

Isn't it Fraser who reminds us over and over that once emotional involvement is added to symbolism's resource of substitution, the conditions are set for the creation of ceremony? Think of payment of fines in lieu of bodily punishment, or for that matter of any code of modern justice that replaces the *lex talionis*. Substitution sets the conditions for transcendence since there is a technical sense in which the name for a thing can be said to transcend the thing named. In this case what I had seen was just a piece of cloth and my own image superimposed on it in the glass. But with the cast of the garment on the glass of my mind, my memory, just as it had the day before, instantly filled in the fire, the terror and the pain. Was the consciousness of this action dishonest? Or is this not the method used by practitioners of religious rites the world over, the bringing together of a memory full of religious experience with objects that will activate that experience? Yet, in truth, my experience was not quite religious, not yet anyway. For I don't think I had the wherewithal in my background to read correctly or at least religiously what had happened to me. Think of the cross itself. To a geometrician it is just two pieces of wood at right angles to each other. To anyone who has lived through a crucifixion it is a memory full of pain. But to a Christian it is the whole world and beyond, pain but also the redemption beyond pain.

"What is it?"

"What's the matter?"

"What do you see?"

"What does He look like?"

Up until the moment the priest asked his last question I was in the second or pain stage of the movement toward transcendence. And perhaps the only real miracle in this whole story is that I somehow heard the upper case in

the priest's voice or at least sensed a change of some sort immediately as he asked it, kneeling at my feet, the chasuble draped over my lap. I see it now as a kind of *pieta* but I'm sure it was much more confused then as it began to dawn on me that here was a new explanation, one that was unassailable by psychiatrists or friends or family, a psychic phenomenon but a respectable, even, at least at that time, honorable one. Of course none of this was articulated in my mind. I just sat there looking down at his tear-filled face, embarrassed perhaps, feeling a little like a charlatan, perhaps even a little unbelieving. But just as quickly as these doubts came they left. For he was embracing my legs, begging my forgiveness for his doubting me, begging me not to answer his questions, a request that I'm sure was terrible for him to make for, as I came to know later, though he had fasted and flagellated his youth away, nothing so dramatic had ever happened to him. And once more we found ourselves discussing Newman and conversion but this time with none of the academic distance that had marked our first conversation, discussing the similarity of my experience to that of other converts: the blinding flash of light, the vision, the symbolic and real blindness afterwards, the feeling of being spiritually helpless that I was undergoing at that moment.

And this brings to mind Newman's second and greater lie, his allegorical reading of his own conversion as an *imitatio dei*. It's the lie that all converts to Christianity, from Augustine on down, tell themselves, the false analogy of their experience to the passion of Jesus. Church apologists go to great lengths to liken the convert's psychological agonies to the real pain of Jesus. Certainly such an analogy flatters the convert. Yet in cases where the convert wakes up to the vast differences between his Savior's and his own experience it is a stratagem that must backfire. For if one thinks about it there are many more differences aside from actual physical circumstances than there are likenesses. Actual knowledge of heaven vs. promised knowledge. Actual resurrection vs. promised resurrection. Actual immortality vs. promised immortality. There are, in fact, all the differences between a God and a man of which the mind is capable of thinking. *Imitatio dei*? Certainly martyrdom or suicide is closer to what happened on Calvary, suicide for the skeptic, martyrdom for the believer. The death of the will or the death of the intellect or whatever the Church apologists like to talk about, is nothing more than mind metaphysics, word games. The whole analogy is a lie and Newman and Augustine, though consummate authors, were, as men, never anything more than failed martyrs.

But what about me? Was I a failing martyr? What did I want? I don't think it was martyrdom. Then what? For I certainly found the conversion experience satisfactory, almost immediately began to contain my hysteria, the terror that circumstance and my own tortured brain had brought upon



me. And the analogy with classic conversion patterns held up even to the point that when the time came to take the final step, when the instruction was over and my parents and my friends were resigned to it, there was genuine paralysis of my will, a paralysis not only not unusual in such experiences but actually part of the experience itself. The priest, good man that he was, thought my difficulty was doctrine, transsubstantiation in particular. Jews are traditionally supposed to have difficulty with this dogma. And I had teased him about it during discussion. Does Christ appear full-blown but bite-sized upon the communicant's lips? Does one actually feel oneself chewing little hands and feet? Or is the portion limited to small parts of his body, and if so who would be getting what? Ah, the answer is too ribald to contemplate and I'm afraid I laughed at the good man's chagrin. Actually, I had no trouble with this or any other dogma. After all, if what had happened to me had really happened, why then mysteries such as this were easy. And here was the clue to my hesitation: a doubt that any of it had transpired as the priest and I agreed it had, a minute doubt, one never voiced, but a doubt nevertheless. And so weeks went by and it was already almost Easter and still I could not do it.

"What!"

"It's not true!"

"I don't believe it!"

"It can't be!"

It was the priest who brought the news. He was very upset, railed against the old man and his daughter, against alcohol and tobacco. At first I didn't understand. Whom was he talking about? Drunken carelessness, smoking in bed. Then I realized that it was the very same old man and his daughter. No, he kept saying, it wasn't very hard to see how they would turn out, and he kept repeating this phrase over and over as if predictability somehow lessened the terribleness. And then he broke down and wept as he described how he'd given them the last rites. Then he confessed that he had done the same for his own parents, that they had been killed in a take-off crash of their light plane and he had been the first to reach them. I don't think it was so much the news of the deaths as his reaction to them that started me crying. And somehow my tears were able to stop his or perhaps his tears simply began to take the form of words. The hearer of confessions began to confess, first his rage at a God who could allow these tragedies and then his great guilt for feeling such rage and finally his great grief, not only for these deaths but for all his dead parishioners. It was a veritable orgy of feeling and I remember that at the end we were both exhausted, a good exhaustion, one that filled me with a tremendous sense of relief so that without thinking anymore about it I told him I was ready. And we both burst into tears again, only at that moment, tears of joy.

"May almighty God have mercy upon you."

"Forgive you your sins."

"And bring you life everlasting."

"Amen."

At the first Mass after my baptism he wore the chasuble and for the occasion I had had my bandages removed entirely. What did I think at the placement of the wafer upon my lips, or of the look he gave me when he saw the scars? It's odd. I heard the call again. Fire! Fire! Fire! And remembered those moments running toward the voice, the old man in pajamas throwing stones at the house. There's someone trapped up there, he shouted. We've got to get the smoke out! And I joined him, removed my overcoat, threw down my bookbag, found some stones. It was my second toss that did it, right through the large single pane. Yet the window refused to shatter, used the newly made hole to puff a derisive smoke ring into the night and announce the appearance of the woman in the Indian blanket bathrobe. What the hell you doing? she asked. My father's trapped up there! You gotta get him out! And then she was pulling me up onto the porch, instructing me in the geography of her house. Yes! That's what I thought of with the wafer on my tongue, that one last look at them both, the old man whom I was supposed to rescue standing with his daughter, the curl of a slight smile on their otherwise shapeless mouths. And I remember as I made an effort to get them out of my mind, my teeth crunched down upon the wafer. I looked at the priest's cape as he returned to the altar, at Adam and Eve dancing beneath the tree. There was a delicate flavor. And then they were gone.

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POETRY / KASCHNITZ, SOTO

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A Night in December  
/ Marie Luise Kaschnitz

Turnip field, prune trees, river wind.  
Watchmen are tracking a birth to a toolshed.  
This is strictly forbidden!  
Refugees belong in camps—  
they have to be counted.  
A shepherd, waving his staff,  
made the discovery.  
His dog Water signaled at the hut.